

Positive Feedback Loops: Sarcasm and the Pseudo-Argument in Reddit Communities

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to modes of communication, sarcasm may be most commonly associated with the angst-ridden adolescent or rebellious teenager. While the use of sarcasm is certainly not exclusive to these communities, such a comparison may not be entirely without reason. Etymologically, the word 'sarcasm' is derived from the Greek *sarkazein*, meaning "to speak bitterly or sneer", or, more literally, "to tear flesh" ("sarcasm," 2014). Sarcasm, then, is far from a benign feature of language, and there appears to be an inherent acerbity, or even a note of provocation, located within. Indeed, sarcasm has been referred to in research in terms such as "jocular aggression" (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988, p. 192) or "humorous aggression" (Ducharme, 1994, p. 51). This does not mean it is rarely or fastidiously used, however. In spite of any innate or perceived aggression, sarcasm is, in fact, quite a common feature in spoken discourse. Studies have placed the use of sarcastic language at roughly 8% of conversational turns (Gibbs, 2000, p. 5; Tannen, 1984, p. 131), so it is certainly a notable and oft-tapped linguistic resource. As technology progresses, however, computer-mediated communication is becoming increasingly common and, with the advent of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, etc.), increasingly conversational. In this vein, perhaps sarcasm's role as a feature of primarily spoken discourse needs to be re-evaluated. In this paper, I hope to offer a descriptive analysis of sarcasm as produced in an exclusively digital space, as well as bring attention to a novel use of sarcasm specific to this environment: sarcasm used as a *pseudo-argument*.

BACKGROUND

Irony & Sarcasm

Despite its presence as a common and recurrent feature of the English language, sarcasm has remained exceedingly difficult to define (Greenwood & Maynard, 2014; Liebrecht, Kunneman, & van den Bosch, 2013). Much of the writing on sarcasm appears under the larger umbrella of *irony*, and most studies of irony "generally assume that sarcasm is the most typical instance of ironic discourse" (Gibbs, 2000, p. 7). To further muddy the waters, many authors agree that sarcasm and irony are difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish between (Ball, 1965), a conundrum made apparent by the tendency in American English to use the terms 'sarcasm' and 'irony' as interchangeable (Attardo & Giora, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, however (and to eschew further ambiguity), I will follow C. F. Burgers' (2010) definition of irony as an

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utterance in which “the valence [is] reversed between the literal and intended evaluation,” (p. 33) extending this definition to encompass sarcasm as well.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) this ambiguity, sarcasm has inspired a healthy amount of academic research (Olineck & Pexman, 2002), the bulk of which has focused on sarcasm’s more social and interpersonal functions (Rockwell, 2000). Scholars have focused, for example, on how sarcasm is used in conversations between friends (Gibbs, 2000), in power differentials between co-workers (Seckman & Couch, 1989), and in compliments and insults among women (Olineck & Pexman, 2002) – in short, how sarcasm is used in everyday interaction. It has been widely suggested that a defining feature of sarcasm is precisely this everyday interactivity, this face-to-face proximity, characterized by its multi-modal nature: sarcasm exists only as an amalgamation of prosody, timing, posture, facial expression, and so on (Attardo, Eisterhold, Hay, & Poggit, 2003). D. W. Ball (1965), a seminal author on the subject of sarcasm, seems to share this view, stating that sarcasm is “a common everyday linguistic form of biting communication, especially, it would seem, an oral one, with its locus in intimate settings” (p. 191). Though the present study is concerned more with how sarcasm is processed digitally, it is nevertheless useful to discuss previous works on spoken sarcasm, both to establish some general features of sarcasm as a genre, and to use these features as a basis for comparison.

One aforementioned feature of sarcasm which is universally agreed upon is that it is inherently aggressive (Ducharme, 1994; Pogrebin & Poole, 1988). According to existing literature on the subject, a sarcastic utterance must also consist of “ancillary elements of communication which summon up a sarcastic totality, that is, by the over- and under-emphasis of key symbols involving not only words, but also tone and expression” (Ball, 1965, p. 192). Therefore, in an expression such as “Way to go!”, there is the ‘true’ meaning, one of commendation, and the latent potential for a sarcastic, derisive meaning. It is the ancillary elements, such as an exaggerated tone of voice or dead-pan expression, that are required to activate the sarcastic potential of the sentence. If these elements are not present, the sentence remains in its default, positive state. Another primary feature of sarcasm is its dyadic nature; it considers (and requires) a speaker and an audience, an addresser and addressee (Ball, 1965; Gibbs, 2000)². Empirically, it is also the speaker or audience who are most often the object of a sarcasm, resulting in an utterance that is either self-directed (‘I’m a regular genius!’) or other-directed (‘You’re a genius, Tom!’) (Ball, 1965, p. 192). Sarcasm can be affiliative as well, in that its use can promote group solidarity, or function as a sort of wink-and-nod between two knowing parties (Ducharme, 1994). Conversely, sarcasm can serve disaffiliative purposes, such as establishing and reinforcing positions of authority (Coser, 1959; Seckman & Couch, 1989). Sarcasm is also often humorous, as can be seen in its widespread inclusion in the literature of humor (Attardo et al., 2003; Attardo & Giorda, 2007). Furthermore, sarcasm can only be defined as such when one or more of the parties involved – the *sarcasteer*, to borrow Ball’s nomenclature, the object (who may or may not be the *sarcasteer* himself) and the audience – recognize the utterance as sarcastic (Ball, 1965)³. This recognition is crucial. If a certain party, or all parties, fail to recognize the sarcastic nature of the utterance, the sarcasm remains inactivated.

It is also important to note that while some research has been done on sarcasm in written

² The audience need not be external, however, in that “talking to one’s self is dyadic in so far as the actor is playing the two roles of communicator and audience simultaneously” (Ball, 1965, p. 192).

³ It is possible for the *sarcasteer* to take on the role unintentionally, as the audience may read a comment sarcastically when it was not intended.

texts (Burgers, 2010), relatively little has been done on sarcasm within digital and/or anonymous environments, where both the oral and intimate aspects have been removed. While there are a handful of excellent studies on the *#sarcasm* and *#irony* hashtags on Twitter (González-Ibáñez, Muresan, & Wacholder, 2011; Greenwood & Maynard, 2014; Kunneman et al., 2013), Twitter is not an anonymous space, and its condensed nature (a 140-character limit) creates a very specific setting. In an attempt to address this gap, I have focused my data on much more 'conversational' spaces, where direct interaction between (anonymous) individuals plays a greater role.

The Pseudo-Argument

In the forthcoming analysis of sarcastic language, I rely heavily on the work of Kleiner (1998) and his analysis of the word 'whatever' as a marker of what he terms the *pseudo-argument*. In his article, Kleiner defines the pseudo-argument as an argument “in which only the protagonists are present”, hence its *pseudo* status, and in which “the positions and supports of the absent antagonist must continuously be supplied by the protagonists” (p. 589). For his study, Kleiner selected racially homogenous groups of university students and instructed them to discuss and record their conversations on the subject of race. His data showed that during these charged and “attitude-laden” conversations, the speakers would often bracket any differing or protagonistic opinions with the ‘whatever’ discourse marker (p. 589). An example of this is reproduced below:

- 1 H: Yeah. I have a class right now, and - there's -
- 2 it's- it's an African - ah social science class type
- 3 kind of you know it's a general overview of the
- 4 country whatever, and I'M amazed that- that Blacks
- 5 over here even want to be associated with Afric- with
- 6 Africa at all. Oh sure or whatever- it's the homeland
- 7→ you know th- whatever. (p. 603)

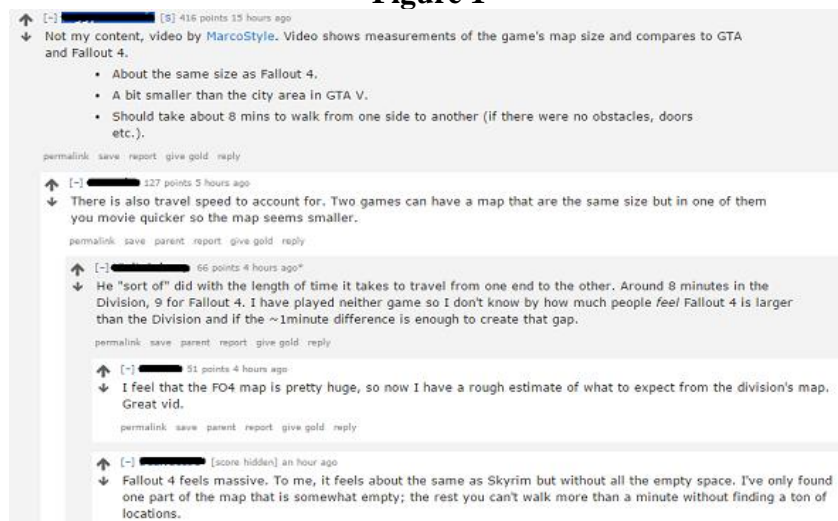
In this excerpt, the speaker uses the word ‘whatever’ in line 7 to tag the preceding sentiment as ‘other-authored’ and differentiate it from his own (and that of his cohort). In my own research, I discovered that online sarcasm was being used to tag statements in a very similar manner.

DATA

The data for this analysis was collected from a free and publicly accessible website called Reddit (<http://www.reddit.com>). Reddit is a social media, entertainment, and news aggregator website which is split into various interest-based communities called subreddits, stylized as r/subreddit-name (e.g. r/music). Some of the most popular subreddits include r/movies, r/science, r/worldnews, and r/gaming, but there are also subreddits dedicated to topics as varied as comic books, hunting, financial advice, and recreational marijuana. In December 2015, Reddit was composed of over 88,700 active subreddits (“Reddit in 2015,” 2015). Reddit additionally

functions as a bulletin board or internet forum, allowing registered accounts to comment on posted material and respond to other users' comments in a descending thread form. This 'threading' is very conversational, and users often participate in lengthy exchanges between multiple parties, with different users chiming in or starting their own tangential 'threads.' An example of this thread-style format can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Users are also able to vote submissions and comments 'up' or 'down' to respectively increase or decrease their rating and visibility. In this way, there is a measure of self-censorship which is conducive to the production of more homogenous communities: if an unpopular opinion is introduced, it is quickly voted down to a less visible position.

Over the course of several months, I collected over 50 examples of sarcastic utterances from the Reddit site, using browser search features to find relevant posts. These were later pared down to a half-dozen examples which typified the general trends discovered throughout the data pool. All utterances chosen were self-identified as sarcastic by the user (using the tag /s), so there would be no question that the data selected was, in fact, intended to be sarcastic⁴. I further focused collection within three main subreddits: r/politics, r/Games, and r/MensRights. r/Games was chosen as representative of a collection of individuals with a shared interest (video games), r/politics as representative of a shared (liberal) ideology, and r/MensRights as it would likely be representative of a more overtly homogenous community (primarily males). By including these differing types of communities, I hoped to pull a broader and more varied data sample. r/MensRights, was additionally chosen for its contentious qualities, to align with Kleiner's (1998) assertion that the pseudo-argument is most likely limited to discussions in which "non-normative", "attitude-laden," or inflammatory ideas are exchanged between people "who are allied in their ideologies and who wish to present themselves to each other in a positive light" (p. 589-590).

Unlike other social media websites such as Facebook or LinkedIn, Reddit is functionally anonymous, as there is nothing automatically linking your username to any personal details, pictures, etc. In fact, posting personal details is discouraged by the moderators of the site ("r/politics," 2015). Even so, all usernames have been changed in the data set. Where applicable,

⁴ The /s tag is discussed in more detail in the Analysis section.

I have attempted to emulate the forum-style threading of the original comments.

ANALYSIS

In this section, I begin by providing some general examples of sarcastic comments to illustrate the form such utterances take on the Reddit site, drawing attention to certain features which they have in common. I then move to the two primary types of sarcasm encountered in the data set. First, I introduce further examples of more typical sarcasm, (i.e., sarcasm that fits with the general features outlined earlier), both to describe how sarcasm is used in an online space, and to provide a source of comparison for later examples of sarcasm as a pseudo-argument. Second, I introduce and analyze a number examples of sarcasm in its pseudo-argumentative state, noting any salient differences. The term 'typical' is used throughout to distinguish sarcasm that is both in line with extant scholarly work, and *not* used as pseudo-argument.

Sarcasm Online

A representative example of a typical sarcastic utterance can be found in the comments of an article posted in the r/politics subreddit, concerning New Jersey governor Chris Christie's controversial suggestion that health workers be quarantined during the 2014 Ebola outbreak:

Excerpt 1:

[robdoeman]

I'm sure we can count on the state of NJ to pick up the tab. /s

Of initial note, a primary and recurrent feature present in the data is the (forward) slash symbol followed by the character *s* (i.e., /s), which appears at the end of the sarcastic utterance. This symbol is used by the commenter to 'tag' the utterance as sarcastic in tone⁵. In a purely textual environment, where participants are anonymous and there is no face-to-face interaction, traditional ancillary elements are, by nature of the medium, wholly absent. In the absence of pitch, gesture, facial expression, and the like, an utterance is indistinguishable as 'true' or sarcastically 'not true'. The /s tag here has become the 'missing' ancillary element, serving the same purpose that, say, a dead-pan expression might. In the example above, then, user [robdoeman] does not, in fact, believe that the state of New Jersey can be counted on to "pick up the tab" in this situation, but rather quite the opposite. Were the /s tag absent, his statement would likely be taken at face value, regardless of context or overstatement. Indeed, I encountered many examples of sarcastic comments missing the tag which had been misunderstood. Take the following comment, from a response to a video depicting a violent all-female gang attacking a 17-year-old girl, also from r/politics:

⁵ For comments on the origin of this tag, see Discussion.

Excerpt 2:

[neversche22]

I'm glad to see a female gang! It's about time that women proved they can commit crimes just as well as men. I'd still like to see more diversity in gang violence, though. We have a long way to go still.

EDIT: /s, because I've received several replies from people who took it only at face value.

Originally, this comment did not include an /s tag. The sentiment, though, that an individual might be *glad* to see a female gang, especially when considering the context of the violent video, is certainly unusual. It would seem unlikely that such a comment, especially with the nod to women's equality, could be taken as anything but hyperbolic. This is clearly not the case, however, as the author later felt it necessary to edit and update her post with the missing tag. This suggests that while spoken sarcasm may have degrees of subtlety, internet sarcasm cannot: it is either fully present (/s) or fully absent (no /s). It appears to be expected, at least by the Reddit community, that any sarcastic utterances will be tagged as such. When they are not, communication can suffer a breakdown. These breakdowns (and there were a number of others) highlight just how vital and ubiquitous the /s tag has become in online communication.

Sarcasm as Typical

Using this /s tag as a flag for selection, I encountered two primary categories of internet sarcasm in my data collection: sarcasm as 'typical', as it followed the tenets set forth in the research (e.g., valence-reversed, aggressive, humorous, etc.), and sarcasm as pseudo-argument. The majority of data I encountered could be filtered into either of these two categories. The excerpts below typify examples of the first, or 'typical' group of utterances. Excerpt 3 is an exchange in the comments of an article on video game journalism from r/Games, and Excerpt 4 was found on a post discussing the Republican party gaining control of the United States Senate in r/politics:

Excerpt 3:

[4jefferson4]

So it's really all about ethics in games journalism?

[sauvedo]

That's a really valid point you made there! What a great comment!

/s

Excerpt 4:

[OFFENSIVE_PULL]

I come to r/politics for all my unbiased news sources and headlines. /s

In Excerpt 3, we have a sarcastic comment that is very traditional in that it is representative of the spirit of the word 'sarcasm': it is rather cutting, indicating that the previous user's comment was invalid and not, in fact, "great" at all. This also perfectly typifies Burger's valence-reversal: the intended meaning of the statement is opposite to its literal meaning. Its dyadic nature is other-directed, and in this sense it can be considered to have an ironic or humorous intent – not humorous for the object of the barb, naturally, but rather for the outside audience. The author did not, for example, state outright that [4jefferson4]'s comment was irrelevant, though this would be a perfectly acceptable option. Since both the sarcastic and non-sarcastic options have an element of aggressiveness, the apparent difference would be that sarcasm has a wash of jocularity to it. In this way, the comment serves as an example of 'typical' sarcasm: cutting, valence-reversed, other-referential, and jocular. The insulting nature of this comment could also easily serve a disaffiliative purpose, extending the social distance between the insulter and insultee. All in all, this comment situates nicely within our established definitions of sarcastic language.

Comments such as that seen in Excerpt 4 were also classified as 'typical' sarcastic utterances. [OFFENSIVE_PULL]'s statement has the requisite acerbic quality (suggesting that the news and headlines in the subreddit are biased), but it is self-referencing, using the pronoun "I", as opposed to Excerpt 3's other-directed "you". There appears to be a humorous wash to this comment as well. Again, the author has chosen to use sarcasm rather than stating simply: "These articles are biased." While self-referential, an audience is an essential part of this exchange, as in Excerpt 3, as the author can expect that his comment will be seen and voted upon. This may have factored into his choice of a more humorous mode of expression. Though not as direct as in the previous excerpt, there is also a reversal of valence in the word "unbiased". This comment also fits with the characteristics of sarcasm as defined in previous scholarship.

There are some differences between the two, however. Whereas in Excerpt 3 the intent seems to be to insult another's comment, Excerpt 4 lacks a direct insultee, and the author does not seem to be insulting himself here – the upturned "unbiased" is directed towards r/politics rather than the speaker himself. Though one might argue that there is an indirect insult to the subreddit of r/politics in general, the inclusion of the self here as the subject, instead of the subreddit, presents the comment as more of a general joke than a specific insult. Thus, this can be further subcategorized as a joking, rather than insulting post. The majority of /s tagged sentences fell into either of these 'insult' (Excerpt 3) or 'joke' (Excerpt 4) subcategories, but because of their internal and external similarities, and because they met the stated expectations of a sarcastic utterance, I have combined them within the broader category as representative of 'typical' sarcastic utterances.

Sarcasm as Pseudo-Argument

A second category encountered during my data collection, and the primary focus of this study, was what I have termed *sarcasm as pseudo-argument*. As previously noted, Kleiner's (1998) research on the pseudo-argument was drawn from gatherings of similarly-aged students grouped homogeneously according to racial background. In Reddit's subreddit-heavy environment, users are similarly grouped according to mutual shared-interests, and are apt to be similarly homogenous. A user frequenting r/comics, for example, would be unlikely to dislike comic books, and would be likely to fall within the metrics for traditional comic book readers:

young, white, and male (Berlatsky, 2014). Demographically, Reddit on the whole is primarily male (59%), white, and aged 18–29 (Duggan & Smith, 2013). In one of the subreddits from which data was collected, r/MensRights, women were understood to be more or less absent, as the community is not designed to cater to them. Unsurprisingly, it was in these more specifically oriented subreddits (as opposed to, say, r/movies or r/music) where I encountered the majority of examples of sarcasm utilized as a pseudo-argument.

In Excerpt 5, from the r/MensRights subreddit, we have an example of this pseudo-argument usage. This extract is taken from the comments on a post decrying Google's lack of an International Men's Day banner on their search page:

Excerpt 5:

[undertown]

Every day is men's day on Google. /s

In this example, the utterance was first in the thread. It was not responding to any other comment, and it stood in an initiating position. As such, the sarcasm here (indicated by the /s tag) is not directed at any specific individual, nor is it self-directed. There are no “you” or “I” pronouns, as in other examples; the statement simply hangs on its own. This is an interesting contrast to earlier examples. The dyadic, referential quality of other excerpts, where the object of the sarcasm is either the audience or sarcaster, has disappeared; there is no clear target for the indicated sarcasm. Further, were the /s tag absent, the comment might be seen as a rational and reasonable rebuttal to the original post's complaint, as men undoubtedly remain part of the hegemonic class. In the context of its subreddit, it is not especially humorous, either. Or, perhaps more accurately, its *intention* is not humorous. It seems to be borne more out of anger or frustration – the users here would like recognition for International Men's Day, but they have not received it. It is not unusually hyperbolic (as in Excerpt 2), joke-like, or insulting. Nor is it acutely aggressive or caustic, especially when viewed in juxtaposition with Excerpts 1 or 3. Instead, it serves simply as the voice of some other party, a party who holds the opposite opinion of the speaker. In a subreddit dedicated to male rights, such an individual is unlikely to be a member of the community, so the antagonistic position must be invoked. The /s tag here serves not to denote sarcasm in its typical sense, but to make this invocation clear: this is not *my* opinion, this is *their* opinion. As with Kleiner's (1998) groups of racially-homogeneous and similarly-aged students, there are no antagonists present in user [undertown]'s argument, nor are any likely to appear, so they must be created.

Perhaps the most telling feature, however, is the lack of any true valence-reversal. The intended meaning is *not* the opposite of the literal meaning here, the intended meaning *is* the literal meaning. The author is not claiming that every day is not International Men's Day, the author is instead stating a possible rebuttal, then identifying it as not his own.

This type of sarcastic usage appeared again and again in the data. A user in r/politics posted the following comment on an article praising Canada's healthcare system:

Excerpt 6:

[lolligags]

But if we have socialized medicine, it means poor people might get it "for free".

/s

Once again, there is no valence-reversal. If the valence were reversed, the author would be stating that poor people *might not* get healthcare for free, or perhaps that the United States (US) *does* have socialized healthcare, or that the sentence itself *does not* mean what it purports. From both situational context and general knowledge, it should be clear that these statements are illogical (e.g., the US does not have socialized healthcare). It is much more likely that the author is, as in Excerpt 5, stating an opposing viewpoint. "Poor people" taking advantage of social welfare programs is a common conservative talking point, and as such may well be an argument from the 'other side'. The subject is also a serious one, and there is little obvious humor; the dourness apparent in Excerpt 5 is mirrored here. Whereas other excerpts may have used ironic humor to seek 'upvotes', the authors of these pseudo-argumentative comments could be using a different strategy. If "present[ing] themselves to each other in a positive light" (Kleiner, 1998, p. 590) is one of the pseudo-argument's goals, and subreddit communities are bastions of homogenous ideology, such sarcastic comments would be likely to garner peer approval. In the liberal milieu of r/politics, then, user [lolligags] finds it necessary to include the /s tag, not to denote (traditional) sarcasm, but to show her peers that the sentiment expressed is not her own.

A third example was taken from comments on an article about a Republican politician's claims that United States President Barack Obama was purposely spreading the Ebola virus:

Excerpt 7:

[LaBelge_GRL]

But remember, both sides are the same, and if you don't give as much credence to his views you are being 'partisan' and therefore part of the problem./S

[dumplingjelly]

Typical lib-bias if only we listened to our god limbaugh more

/s

In these comments, both posters are again stating something that, without the /s tag, could be similar to comments from the opposing, or antagonist 'side' of the argument. However, in the openly anti-Republican environment of the comments section as a whole (and the site in general), any open dissent is unlikely. With no antagonist present, or any antagonistic opinions downvoted into obscurity, only protagonistic arguments remain. User [LaBelge_GRL] introduces, we can assume, a commonly held opinion of the 'other' group/s. As with Excerpts 5 and 6, this comment does not fit nicely into our previously introduced subcategories of 'joke' or 'insult', nor does it match the typical features of sarcasm as delineated earlier. Despite the "you" subject pronoun, for example, the comment is the first in the thread, it is not directed towards anyone, unlike in Excerpt 3, which is clearly directed at the poster above the comment. It is more ambiguous: a general statement produced not by the author herself, but by some imagined antagonist who does not actually exist as an individual. While it does read acridly, it is lacking

the jocularity of typical sarcasm. As in the previous two excerpts, it reads more as angry or upset than humorous or joke-like. This is unsurprising, since, as can be seen in Kleiner's (1998) data, this specific type of utterance occurs most frequently in more controversial, emotion-inciting, or heated topics.

We can see another feature of Kleiner's (1998) pseudo-argument structure in the follow-up to [LaBelge_GRL]'s post. After the antagonist's position has been expressed, it is followed by further examples of invoked antagonistic viewpoints, here seen in [dumplingjelly]'s Rush Limbaugh comment. This *collaborative argument*, where the original position is then buttressed with similar *other*-based arguments, is one of the pseudo-argument's subordinate sequences (p. 595). In a true argument, there is some attempt to change the opposing party's viewpoint, or convince them of their own (p. 601). The speakers here are in accord, however; they have no such aim. Rather, the two parties "seem to collaborate in discussion for the purpose of reinforcing mutually held beliefs" (p. 601). One could easily replace the /s in either excerpt with one of Kleiner's "or whatever"s and the function and meaning of the utterance would be identical. The interlocutors produce branching, collaborative statements, implicitly agreeing with one another through the mutual use of /s tags.

A final example is taken from an article regarding the establishment of men's shelters:

Excerpt 8:

[tobias_r]

Don't you know men don't get harassed? And they don't get abused or raped?

Clearly they just want to undermine women shelters /s

Here we have yet another conjuration of an absent antagonist. The idea that men's shelters only exist to undermine women's shelters, and that men are not sexually harassed, is not one that the author holds (which only the /s tag makes clear). Again, this is the initiating comment in a thread, so the "you" here does not refer to any specific user. Instead, the "you" refers to the author himself, though not in a reflexive or traditionally self-referential way. The comment *is* an attack (albeit an indirect one), but the attacker is an invention of [tobias_r], and the target is himself and all those in his community. It may be, for example, that [tobias_r] believes his comment is a position held by radical feminists, a group which could be ideologically opposed to such shelters (Phoca & Wright, 1999). Radical feminists, though, would hardly be expected to be members of a men's rights community, so they must be invoked instead. As with other instances of sarcasm as pseudo argument, this utterance is also relatively humorless in comparison to the more traditional examples. There is no clear joke in this comment, as the topic of sexual assault is certainly a serious one.

This is also an interesting excerpt where valence is concerned. Unlike Excerpts 5 and 6, we can see what appears to be valence-reversal in [tobias_r]'s post. Men, after all, *are* abused and *are* sexually assaulted. It is not, however, the valence that is being reversed in this sentence, it is the *speaker* who is reversed. The user behind [tobias_r] is not replacing literal meaning with intended meaning, he is replacing himself as speaker entirely. The words are not his words, and while [tobias_r] may not mean them literally, his invented antagonist does. This is a very different usage from the more typical selections, and from, I would argue, sarcasm as a whole.

There were some instances of sarcastic data, however, which were not easily identified or

categorized. Occasionally, a post would surface which contained overlapping elements, or did not fit the established criteria at all. An example of one such comment is included below, in which two users are discussing the installation of a gaming program:

Excerpt 9:

[throwaway67922]

No icon on desktop == software not installed

[heartknock]

Make sure not to delete the icon otherwise the entire program is gone. /s

The latter comment is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it cannot not be clearly defined as an insult or a joke. Is the user mocking the first poster's computer-savviness? Or is he simply making a joke? It is also possible that both users are making similar humorous comments on the general installation and deletion process of software. As [throwaway67922] has not tagged his comment as sarcastic, his own intentions are unclear. Secondly, and regardless of the first comment, the sarcastic tag may be being used improperly here. If we follow the standard valence-reversal, the author seems to be stating that one *should* delete the icon. The statement is not in need of reversal, as either possibility (deleting the icon or not) leads to the same erroneous outcome. If we compare this to Excerpt 3 or 4, the difference becomes more apparent. In the phrase "What a great comment!", for example, the reversal of meaning is both functional and appropriate. Additionally, the comment does not seem cutting or biting in any way, either to the poster himself or to the poster he is responding to. The excerpt could even be interpreted as a malformed instance of sarcasm as pseudo-argument. The second poster (or both posters) could be conjuring the persona of a far less computer-literate individual. If this is the case, however, it does not align with Kleiner's (1998) "argument" nomenclature. There is no argument here, pseudo- or otherwise, as there are no countering positions or reinforced beliefs. Fortunately, questionable posts such as this were uncommon.

DISCUSSION

We have established, then, that sarcasm has certain innate qualities: it requires ancillary elements, is valence-reversed, affiliative or disaffiliative, jocular, and, of course, aggressive. In this paper, I have attempted to show that in online communication, the ancillary or spoken elements have been replaced out of necessity by text: namely, the /s tag. The remaining elements, however, are still present in the form of 'typical' sarcastic utterances. Sarcasm endures as a common and well-used linguistic resource, even when it is parsed digitally. I have also attempted to shed light on a second, more novel form of sarcasm which has appeared in more interactive online spaces: sarcasm as pseudo-argument.

Expanding upon Kleiner's (1998) "whatever", the primary job of sarcasm as pseudo-argument is to "[mark] ... material as 'other-authored' and at the same time [signal] the speaker's disaffiliation with, or opposition to, its content" (p. 602). What can then follow is a *collaborative argument*, a form of positive feedback loop. The homogeneous interest- or ideology-based communities on Reddit generate a high degree of accord. Pseudo-arguments and their ensuing

collaborative arguments collect into a textual back-patting of sorts (often validated using ‘upvotes’), with everyone agreeing with one another whilst simultaneously disagreeing with the non-existent, /s-tagged antagonists. This exact circular, self-congratulatory phenomenon has been widely recognized within the Reddit community, and there is even an entire meta-subreddit dedicated to pointing out examples of it⁶.

Whereas instances of spoken sarcasm have previously been described as either affiliative (Coser, 1959; Gibbs, 2000) or disaffiliative (Seckman & Couch, 1989), I would argue that for the subreddit-based pseudo-argument, sarcasm is both affiliative ('We all agree on this') *and* disaffiliative ('We all don't agree with this'). Comments such as those in Excerpts 5, 6, 7, or 8 serve both to bring together a community of *us*-es, while simultaneously disaffiliating with the *thems*. As the *thems* are not present, not a part of the group, they must be conjured up. Further, these instances of sarcasm do not hold humor as their nucleus, though they may have a humorous element. They are not jokes, nor are they playful direct insults. Their primary function, and the speaker's main intent, is to mimic the wording of a potential someone they would disagree with. As in Kleiner's (1998) work, there is no true argument, as an argument requires both protagonist and antagonist. Instead, we have one-sided pseudo-arguments, initiated not by a spoken discourse marker, “whatever”, but instead by a tag indicating sarcastic intent. Even one of sarcasm's most defining features, its aggressiveness, falls to the wayside. That is not to say they are not antagonistic; they remain, at least in part, an argument and therefore must be – but they are designed, constructed, and consumed by people who are all in accord. In this way, and in this context, they lose much of their innate, flesh-rending capacity. In Excerpt 6, the speakers even seem friendly or agreeable, despite both parties using sarcastic language. It is my belief that this is sarcasm used in a new and different way, in a new and different medium, departing from many of the heretofore accepted tenets of sarcastic language. It is sarcasm not for the sake of being sarcastic, but for the sake of marking an utterance as 'not my words', simultaneously serving both an affiliative and disaffiliative community-building purpose.

If the sarcastic pseudo-argument disregards so many of scholarly sarcasm's prototypical features, however, an important question arises: does it even remain sarcasm? Perhaps it is just another example of the conflation or evolution of the term, containing elements of ‘true’ sarcasm, irony, or even parody and satire. While certain excerpts may hint at this (e.g., Excerpt 9), I believe the question remains as of yet unanswered. Further research will need to be done, larger samples of data collected, and different methods (Conversation Analysis, etc.) applied to flesh out the existing knowledge and fill in any recently exposed gaps. Additionally, the rapid advance of technology shows no sign of slowing, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) is bound to become an increasingly more common form of interaction. As such, research in CMC should not be ignored, especially in spaces like Reddit, where the interpersonal and the technological so readily overlap.

The /s tag, moreover, is not limited to Reddit alone. I have stumbled across instances of it in a wide variety of board- and thread-based websites. User forums for various gaming websites, online blogs such as Tumblr or Blogspot, the comment section of Youtube or news websites: all contain examples of similar sarcastic tokens. It would appear that it has become a widespread feature of online communication in general. The pseudo-argument itself, however, remains anchored in more conversational spaces.

⁶ In a vulgar nod its self-serving and masturbatory nature, the phenomenon is colloquially called the 'circlejerk', and the subreddit r/circlejerk pokes fun at this.

It may also be worth considering, in my belief, the nature and origin of the /s tag. In final post-sentential position, the /s tag can be read as a type form of pseudo-HTML code. The /s, then, would be an abbreviated version of </s>, which in turn is a truncation of the HTML code <s>TEXT</s>. In HTML, to initiate a certain function, such as italicizing text, a tag such as <i> is used. In turn, to end this tag, a corresponding </i> tag is used. In that sense <i> equates to 'begin italics' and </i> equates to 'end italics', with the text to be italicized nested in-between. In this manner, the </s> tag is functionally stating 'end sarcasm' or 'the sarcasm ends here'. The interlacing of two separate languages (English and HTML) is quite interesting, especially considering the medium where the data is present: a website. Here, the medium itself has bled through into the message, the invisible HTML code behind the website seeping out into the text. As technology motivates the evolution of language to a more digitized state, perhaps the features of language, sarcasm included, are similarly evolving. Though beyond the scope of this study, there are other queries here relating to the distillation of html code to a simple /s (e.g., why not <s> or </s>?), as well as questions about positioning (e.g., why final rather than initial; why anaphoric rather than cataphoric; would it not make more sense to inform the reader of the sarcastic tone at the beginning of the utterance?). I believe these are all intriguing questions which may well warrant further attention.

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